



Logos Abused (Part I): The Decadence and Tyranny of Abstract Reasoning in Economics

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This article was first published in *GroundSwell*, a publication from Common Ground, USA. The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation has received approval from Common Ground, USA to republish this article at no cost for educational purposes.

Article citation:

Gaffney, Mason. "Logos Abused (Part I): The Decadence and Tyranny of Abstract Reasoning in Economics." *GroundSwell*, Dec. 2014, pp. 7–11.

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LOGOS ABUSED

The Decadence and Tyranny of Abstract Reasoning in Economics – part I

By Dr. Mason Gaffney, Riverside, CA

The writer acknowledges the role and value of abstract reasoning in economics. He has done his share of it, and is not reacting against rationalism or marginalism. Abstract, however, should not mean abstruse or obscure; theoretical should not mean irrelevant or impractical; ideal should not mean intolerant or imperialistic. Theorists are increasingly scorning those rules and carrying their work beyond its proper role to extremes of abstrusity, irrelevance and presumption that are damaging and screening out students and writers whose purpose is to understand and apply economic reasoning to the human condition. This paper seeks through historical parallels to understand the animus behind that movement, and suggest how to check its excesses.

1. Six kinds of cognition

There are different methods of cognition (knowing, understanding and ordering the data of the senses). Our concern is with cognition of social life, including relationships of property, markets, contracts and inheritance. The Greeks had a word for each method of cognition.

A. *Chaos*, raw data without ordering or understanding. Viewed favorably, chaos is liberating and objective. Observing data chaotically, without preconceived ordering, is a precondition of creative work and inductive reasoning that leads to generalizations, hypotheses and theories to serve as premises for later deductive reasoning. Viewed pejoratively chaos is scatterbrained. Viewed as mediocrity, chaos is description and reporting, or mindless bean-counting, answers without questions.

B. *Pathos*, elemental feelings: love, hate, security, anxiety, comfort, hunger, excitement, boredom, compassion, greed, loyalty, ambition, pride, guilt, lust, jealousy, community, alienation, fellow-feeling, rivalry, charity, possessiveness, service, selfishness, etc. These are the basis of consumer wants. Merely to list those few gives a notion how hard it is to reduce them to symbols and abstractions.

C. *Mysterion*, or mystery: faith, belief, hope, fear, devotion, piety, consecration, sanctification, worship, prayer, occultism, mysticism, animism, spiritualism, aspiration, convictions about the unknown and unknowable.

D. *Hierarches*, or corporate organization, with ranking and authority, creed and dogma, orthodoxy and heresy, law and order, pageant and ritual, test and certification, code and discipline, income and property, fund and disbursement, owner and tenant, taboo and enjoinder, text and censor.

E. *Logos*, or pure metaphysical a priori reasoning from axioms, using mathematics, logic and dialectic, with allegories, symbols, abstractions, universals and generalizations.

Theologians use *Logos* as divine wisdom; we use it here for human attempts to attain something comparably universal, attempts some might consider presumptuous.

F. *Sophia*, or wisdom: reason applied to human problems, tempered by experience, judgment, circumstances, ethics, justice, mores, institutions, administrability, etc. The evolution of social thought leads ideally through E to F, but historically E has been a roadblock. *Logos*, partly from its

difficult nature, more so from the exclusionary pretensions of its practitioners, repels many persons, who take refuge in A, B and C. In addition, leaders of D are skilled at coopting practitioners of E.

2. *Logos* run wild: neo-Platonism

Neo-Platonism, in the decadent period of Roman-Hellenistic power and culture, developed E to extremes which identify and symbolize the genus *Logos*, pure and picked clean of any *Chaos* or *Pathos*. Abstract forms are the only realities (Plotinus of Alexandria, 3d century A.D.). Matter and spirit are mutually hostile elements. The body is the prison of the soul, an emanation of the divine mind which contains all the “real” Platonic forms. Objects (events are not mentioned) in the apparent world are just poor imitations of these ideal forms.

The system of Platonic forms is logically rigid in detail. Allegories explain more than apparent events. Thought is rarefied, ethereal, otherworldly. In Plotinus’ period, asceticism and mortification of the flesh were in vogue. The object of the soul is to escape the confines of matter and regain the divine essence whence it came. Through repeated exercises of mysticism (combining C and E) one may reach “the one,” the all-surpassing glory of life. What most people call “life” is merely what happens while anchorites and monastics meditate on its deeper meaning.

Rene Descartes, founder of analytic geometry, led a revival of neo-Platonism in the early 17th Century. Ambition and his “dream of reason” led the great mathematician before a fall. He aspired to impose mathematical method on all fields of knowledge. Mind was separate from matter, and prior to it: “I think, therefore I am.” His “Vortex Theory” of astronomy, however, defied plain facts and was soon demolished by an earthier observer and cogitator who began wondering why an apple fell on his head. Newton’s apple was clearly from the Tree of Knowledge, forbidden by both *Mysterion* and Descartes’ *a priori Logos*.

3. *Hierarches*: order and assimilation

In the 4th century, it is said, “The Church supplanted Christianity,” meaning D, *Hierarches*, supplanted C, *Mysterion*. D did not destroy C, but absorbed it. That was easy, mystery and hierarchy had long histories together. Over centuries The Church proved adept at coopting wave after wave of evangelical reformers moved by spontaneous *Mysterion*. It converted them to religious orders: Cluniacs, Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, ... it is a long list. The idea was to bring contagious movements within control of The Church, where they could absorb critical tendencies under watchful eyes. The operative rule is that wealth undermines zeal. Zealots who would not hold property and had communistic ideals were particularly trying, therefore, especially while their dedicated founders retained control. (continued on page 8)

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The stubbornest cases (Albigensians, Waldensians, Anabaptists) had to be exterminated by burning. The Church prevailed even over the saintly, gentle Francis of Assisi: not long after his death in 1226 A.D. Franciscans with stipends were helping Dominicans administer The Inquisition.

Assimilating evangelicals was perhaps enough to satisfy the credulous majority. However, for the troublesome intellectual minority *Logos* is always an issue. To placate or dominate the intellectuals, *Hierarches* also absorbed E, *Logos*. Platonic formalism made that easier; formalism tends toward authoritarianism. Plato's *Republic* is acknowledged today as a fascist model.

Augustine's *City of God* was a Platonic prototype of spirit separated from flesh. In this city an elite, chosen by God, were "predestined" for salvation hereafter (and to rule today). Clement and Origen taught the Sacred Writings as allegories. They were moving from C, *Mysterion*, toward E, *Logos*. The simple may take Scriptures literally; the sophisticated read between the lines. They see deeper truth in the metaphor, the significance behind the meaning. Some of this significance is social. The social corollaries of Platonism add powerful political-economic support. Imputing reality to abstractions helps give binding force to commitments made in the names of universals (The United States, Dartmouth College, General Motors, City of Chicago) by particular individuals: commitments like land titles, bonds, franchises, etc. Hierarchies themselves are Platonic forms: tables of organization that transcend individuals. Thus it may be that Platonism has socially conservative implications, if by "conservatism" we mean not individualism but tradition, vested interest, property, statism, corporatism, etc. In Education, Platonism is prized to combat the menace of social relevancy. Universities do not become ivory towers and sanctuaries from reality by accident. Pragmatism applied to public policy leads inevitably to questions about origins and validity of property, distribution of wealth, basic values of consumption, the costs, benefits and beneficiaries of public works, and leadership of the polity. For example, John Dewey the pragmatist was a social radical, troublesome for Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler. John Locke was exiled; his contemporary Isaac Newton was spared that fate. Newton may have been more radical intellectually, but not socially. Thorstein Veblen, John R. Commons and other Institutional economists were social critics. The *Hierarches* feels threatened and may strike back. Platonic detachment is a refuge for besieged or lazy Administrators, a very present help in time of trouble.

Mysterion, *Hierarches* and *Logos* also merge when reasoning is so difficult, or made so difficult it mystifies and intimidates. Abstract reasoning and theory have an important place in economics, but in evaluating specifics the sincere inquirer must always judge them on grounds of clarity and utility. He rejects whatever works to mystify or intimidate, rather than edify and empower the audience.

Hierarchy, however, usually takes the opposite view. Its task is to absorb and neutralize what is socially challenging, pertinent or threatening. To this end it converts problem-solving reasoning to arid abstractions and conundrums of the

Logos, leading students on an endless paper chase. Hierarchy does not deliver on the implied promise of a Holy Grail of Enlightenment at the end of the chase. The exhausted survivors, like hazed fraternity members, turn their frustration and spite on the next generation in a treadmill of futility.

4. Intellectual Imperialism

Mysterion, *Hierarches* and *Logos* join in their claims of exclusiveness. They define and enforce orthodoxy. As independent prophets disturbed the constituted authorities of the medieval Church, so they threaten authorities of modern Academe. The Churches at times persecuted heretics. It was necessary to establish that no priest is free to ignore the statutes of the Apostolic See. Forgery, murder, torture, even extermination were acceptable methods, failing friendly persuasion or ordinary intimidation. In modern Academe Liberalism proscribes overt Inquisitions on the old models. The new technique is crowding-out: Orthodoxy and Authority crowd Heresy out of the curriculum by piling on required "theory" studies, controlled by Orthodoxy. The idea is to preempt students' limited time and attention, just as monopolies control markets by preempting key resources. Economists who teach the science of allocating scarce means among competing ends know full well students' time is one of those scarce means. Time may be infinite, and that informs the rhetoric when new requirements are added; but students' time is finite. Therefore "Exclusion is also part of knowledge," an observation worthy of an economist but coming from physicist Michael Faraday.

To doubly limit students' time hierarchs press us to lower the "normative time to degree," constricting the later end of students' freedom. The other pincer attacks the earlier end, extending the required core theory courses. Together the pincers curtail the creative period of restless, troublesome innovation. Such are the ways of orthodoxy, suffocating and oppressive. The pincer at the front end not only crowds out, it screens out. Screening is doubly important today when *Hierarches* has lost its ancient weapons of Interdiction and Excommunication, reinforced by The Curse of Anathema and the fear of hell. Now scholars get tenure; mistakes are unerasable, and must be aborted. Orthodoxy keeps the gate and judges who may enter. In the process of judging and screening it indoctrinates, by establishing a monopoly over theory. "Intelligence," says Henri Bergson, "is the faculty of manufacturing artificial objects, especially tools to make tools." Theory supplies the machine tools of thinking. Who controls theory has a powerful grip on how students are to think. Students seeking order from the chaos of disputed data and swirling, competing models in a complex discipline grasp for a system, an ordered framework offering refuge from *Chaos*. The first and only system they have to study gets a long jump on the competition.

These theory requirements are metaphysical, that is *Logos*, pure reason, whose application to the actual human condition is a *Mysterion* which never gets to *Sophia* (wisdom). The metaphysic may be highly formal, rigorous and demanding, which enhances its exclusiveness. The tendency in modern Academe, as in the medieval (continued on page 9)

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church, is toward ever more ceremonial formality to crowd out content. Isidore of Seville, a 7th Century authoritarian, at least sought to preserve the work of the past. Modern metaphysics crowds out not just *Sophia* but *Clio* as well, with her large portion of *Sophia*. Thus surviving students gain Doctorates knowing neither where we are, nor how we got here.

Waldensians in the 12th Century, and soon Franciscans too, preached without formal training or ordination. When *Hierarches* assimilated the Franciscans they insisted university training was necessary for efficient preaching. *Hierarches* conferred (or withheld) the right to preach. Soon Francis' original sense of mission was lost, and Franciscans were part of the hierarchy. Viewing modern university training in economics it is easy to imagine how the process worked then, and crystal clear how it works now.

5. Exclusionary Codes and Languages

Exclusionists enhance their claims by proscribing Vernacular communication. Donatus, Latin grammarian and stylist of the 4th Century, made an art of Latin which served as the intellectual medium for a millennium. Dark-Ages' scholars were so uncreative they limited themselves to commenting on Donatus most of that time.

Boethius, famous for translating Aristotle in the 6th Century, translated the Greek only into Latin. That was reasonable for him, a Roman, but it went no further. So narrow was the circle that we find St. Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastic movement in the 13th century reviving Boethius' favorite project of reconciling Faith and Reason (*Mysterion* and *Logos*). Not until printing and the Gutenberg Bible was the Scripture, the basis of medieval intellectual life, available in any Vernacular. Exclusiveness was assured by restricting discourse to a dead foreign language, known only to an elect few who, having learned Latin developed *ipso facto* a vested interest in it. Understanding was not the main idea. As Anselm said, "If he can understand it, let him thank God. If he cannot, let him not raise his head in opposition but bow in reverence." Anselm was canonized.

The method of modern exclusionists is no longer the use of Latin, but of new Cabalistic symbols impenetrable to most readers. A few persons may enter the cartel by accepting indoctrination via these new Codes, but entry of new scholars provokes the development of new, more abstruse Codes. The Cult of Progress having replaced the Cult of Antiquity, all this is done in her good name, on a sweaty treadmill going nowhere.

Baruch Spinoza, 17th century philosopher, laid down a few rules of teaching. Rule #1 is "To speak in a manner comprehensible to the people..." He was called arrogant. If this be arrogance, the standard curricula of today are humble indeed, where "comprehensible is reprehensible," and standard authorities patronize plain talk as vulgar populism. Is it really appropriate that the people's University should communicate only internally and in private glossalalia? In our competitive pursuit of specious prestige and respectability, as connoted by difficulty, many use obscurity in lieu of authentic high standards with useful substantive content and constructive purpose.

Spinoza exemplifies the danger to hierarchs of philosophers who communicate with common folk. He strayed into a *Tractatus Politicus* presuming to deal with public affairs, where his policy positions were quite leveling. "The military basis of

democracy should be universal military service, ...; its fiscal basis should be the single tax. 'The fields and the whole soil ... should be public property, ... let at a yearly rental to the citizen; ... and with this exception let them all be free from every kind of taxation in time of peace.'

Spinoza was prescient, anticipating the brain drain that besets cities, states, provinces and countries that support education handsomely by use of job-aborting tax systems (like the high VAT of Ireland, the sales and excise taxes of The Philippines) which in turn close off opportunities for the graduates, who then emigrate along with their stored-up human capital.

6. The Cult of Rigor

Authority (*apomnemonysis*) and Obscurity are reinforced by a call for Rigor, perhaps echoing Calvin's revival of the ascetic notion that penance improves the character. What is "Rigor" that we should be mindful of? Rigor is "Harsh inflexibility in opinion, temper, or judgment; the quality of being unyielding or inflexible; severity of life; strictness, severity or cruelty; a condition that makes life difficult, challenging, or uncomfortable; strict precision; rigidity or torpor of organs or tissue that prevents response to stimuli."

The last meaning is most familiar, and just a step short of *rigor mortis*, its logical extension. *Rigor* without *mors* is a cruel punishment. Excessive Rigor atrophies the right hemisphere of the brain, the creative, intuitive half that thrives on *Chaos* and *Pathos*. The trick of course is to bring order out of *Chaos* and *Pathos* without killing creativity. The Cult of Rigor would maintain order, its own order, at whatever cost.

None of the values in the definition of Rigor look very positive except for the "strict precision," and we might well even sacrifice that if the rest of the baggage must come along. Even strict precision may be useless in evaluating imprecise but important economic ideas and phenomena such as expectations, uncertainty, animal spirits, taste formation, the interface of law and economics, paranoia and the military budget, or the case for inheritance taxation.

There is little Rigor in the relevant and important observation "Corporations have neither bodies to be kicked, nor souls to be damned"? Where do we stand on Matthew Arnold's thought, "Inequality materializes our upper class, vulgarizes our middle class, and brutalizes our lower class"? Or Confucius, "The superior man understands what is right, the inferior man understands what will sell." Or Cicero, "...there is nothing so characteristic of narrowness and littleness of soul as the love of riches; and there is nothing more honorable or noble than indifference to money."

Francis Bacon wrote "There are four classes of idols which beset men's minds: Idols of the Tribe, of the Cave, of the Market-place, and of the Theater." Is our supposed rigor just another Idol, after all, and we Idolaters? Bacon went on "all the received systems of (cont'd on p. 10)

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philosophy are but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion....And in the plays of this philosophic theatre you may observe the same thing which is found in the theater of the poets, —that stories invented for the stage are more compact and elegant, and more as we would wish them to be, than true stories out of history.”

True stories out of history are both more realistic and more interesting than enduring rigors let students get at them.

Serious students accept the need to endure some mortification of the flesh to learn and achieve. The cruelty of Rigor is it mortifies the flesh without uplifting the spirit, which instead it shrivels. Most students see through its pretensions and would flee its arid, sterile tribulations. It is not marketable: Platonic economics is as dry as Platonic love.

To overcome resistance we force students into rigors in the name of Quality, with the implied promise they later may study humane topics actually bearing on the human condition, the interest that drew them to us originally. However, many of them see through these Platonic methods as the infinite digression (*apoplansis*) that they are, and how they are to dominate later studies as well —why else are they The Core? Many, perhaps most excellent students lose interest, swallow their losses and drop out quietly, not wanting to advertise their “failure.”

7. Shame of Arrogance: the Precept of Conformity and Humility

To maintain control in a more democratic time, the Cult of Conformity has replaced the Cult of Authority. Now the cry is we must learn to read certain journals previously captured by the exclusionists. These become the new Sacred Texts and Canon of Orthodoxy.

Erigena, Carolingian scholar considered the one original thinker of the Dark Ages, wrote “All authority which is not approved by reason seems weak.” That seems too obvious to recite today, until we think how the Argument from Conformity (*apodixis*) has become the new Argument from Authority (*apomnemynosis*). Scotus continued, “But true reason, since it is established in its own strength, needs to be strengthened by the assent of no authority.” How does Authority answer the challenge?

It is traditional for *Hierarches* to shame independent thinkers as “arrogant.” The Deacon of Lyons condemned Scotus for “daring to define with his own presumption what should be held and followed.” Eight centuries later Baruch Spinoza, one of the rare original and relevant thinkers, received similar treatment. A former student, Albert Burgh, reverted to Orthodoxy and addressed Spinoza thus: “How dare you set yourself up above all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, doctors and confessors of the Church? Miserable man and worm upon the earth that you are, yea, ashes and food for worms, how can you confront the eternal wisdom with your unspeakable blasphemy. ... What devilish pride puffs you up to pass judgment on mysteries which Catholics themselves declare to be incomprehensible?”

This appeal to general practice was an old rhetorical ruse. Aristotle called it *apodixis*. Burgh’s modern disciples use

apodixis rather like this. We must teach what is taught in “respectable” departments elsewhere. Such topics are “minimal essential knowledge for a modern economist,” with which “all students should be familiar.” Like Burgh, the modern authoritarian also trashes deviants with a post-Greek concept, shame and guilt. To think otherwise than the respectable herd is “arrogant.” Who can defend against that before a modern academic Sanhedrin?

“Respectable,” I suggest, is an offensive term because of the value-system it exalts and dictates. It idolizes the herd instinct, the Idols of the Tribe. It is, one may object, an elitist herd, one above the common. However every herd thus fancies itself. No herd was ever universal, only truth is that. Let us therefore seek not respectability, but respect.

Spinoza, born Jewish, got no comfort from the Synagogue of Amsterdam. In excommunicating Spinoza its leaders also remarked on the “insolence with which these heresies are promulgated.” No one was to “read any document dictated by him, or written by his hand.” Thus the mindset that imputed insolence moved directly to censorship, a point to be well noted in the modern context.

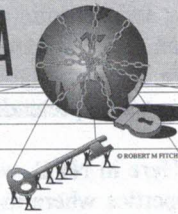
Durant expands on Spinoza’s arrogance: “Spinoza has not much use for humility; it is either the hypocrisy of a schemer or the timidity of a slave; it implies the absence of power —whereas to Spinoza all virtues are forms of ability and power. ... ‘humility is very rare’; and as Cicero said, even the philosophers who write books in its praise take care to put their names on the title-page. ‘One who despises himself is nearest to a proud man,’ ... And whereas Spinoza dislikes humility he admires modesty, and objects to a pride that is not ‘tenoned and mortised’ in deeds.”

Spinoza even arrogantly refused the Chair of Philosophy at Heidelberg, even though he was assured “the most perfect freedom in philosophizing, which His Highness feels assured you would not abuse by calling in question the established religion of the state.” *Hierarches* would patronize *Logos*, if *Logos* would kneel.

It reckoned without Spinoza’s *Sophia* (observation and judgment). Spinoza anticipated our present condition, writing “Academies that are founded at the public expense are instituted not so much to cultivate men’s natural abilities as to restrain them.” He advocated a freedom wherein, “...everyone that asks leave is allowed to teach publicly, at his own cost and risk.” Such arrogance! Obviously he believed his business would survive in the competition, perhaps because of his Rule #1, “To speak in a manner comprehensible to the people.”

Thus arrogance leads to self-deprivation or ingratitude to patrons. A modern university Chancellor might well reprobate it as reaping the punishment it deserves. Yet should we not rather admire and support those who deny themselves sure conventional rewards in order to guard their freedom to pursue truth? History has treated Spinoza with more respect than did the organization-men of his day, or than history has treated them, whom it has forgotten except as his arrogance exposed their presumption, tyranny and hypocrisy. Another arrogant philosopher was Immanuel Kant, who immodestly prefaces his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “...there ought not to be one single metaphysical (cont’d on pg. 16)

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problem that has not been solved here.” With such proud egotism nature spurs us on to creation. In his arrogance Kant, like Spinoza and Bacon, rejected pure *a priorism* with its pretense of Rigor. Observing the enduring reputation of Kant, perhaps arrogance is preferable to the humility of those who, in humbly pursuing only respectability attain only humble goals.

The danger in such a man, of course, is he may speak out on public affairs, and Kant did so under the very nose and guns of Frederick the Great. Kant, in *Eternal Peace*, condemned imperialism, land-grabbing, conscription, and privileges of rank and class, and promoted subversions like democracy and world government.

Most moderns would give lip-service to Scotus, Spinoza, Bacon and Kant, their heresies safely buried in the distant past. Yet the ghosts of The Lyons’ Deacon, Albert Burgh, the Synagogue of Amsterdam and His Highness prevail in molding and casting modern economics’ curricula.

Would Spinoza, Bacon or Kant find refuge in Academe today? Would Tom Paine find happiness under Mrs. Grundy? In an unreasonable age, a man’s reason let loose might undo him. Let us do better, though, than stepping aside nimbly while ignorant armies clash by night. Let us be arrogant enough to follow our own beliefs to the extent of framing a curriculum on what we perceive to be its merits. Let us be too arrogant to follow the moods and caprices of the day, as women change their hemlines and men their lapels. A great philosophy is not a philosophy without reproach but without fear.

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(Logos Abused will be concluded in the next issue of GroundSwell with sections 8-13. GroundSwell does not have room for footnotes, but they are available from Economics Professor Dr. Mason Gaffney at m.gaffney@dslextrreme.com) <<

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INTERESTING SESSIONS ANNOUNCED FOR THE 2015 CGO CONFERENCE

The joint International Union (<http://www.theiu.org/>) / Council of Georgist Organizations (<http://www.cgocouncil.org/>) programming team is pleased to announce the following topics:

Education: The non-negotiable basics with Lindy Davies.

Mike Curtis and others: what concepts are absolutely necessary for us to get across, in order to build our movement? The topic is a timely and relevant concept; there's some debate going on about various dilutions of Georgist ideas, and the need for effectiveness of any kind of education program.

Mason Gaffney on "What's the Matter with Michigan?"

Heather Wetzel on "Welfare for the Rich"

Ted Gwartney & Mason Gaffney on the moral of Southfield: moving towards LVT by Assessment Reform.

Movement Building

International Education

Social Media

Karl Fitzgerald is coming from Australia to speak on the Global Land Bubble.

Former CGO President & current IU Secretary General Alanna Hartzok has graciously agreed to be (concluded on page 14)